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A HIGH-MINDED PUBLIC MAN

BY W. D. HOWELLS

THE introduction to Mr. Horace White's biography of Lyman Trumbull¹ is such an excellent piece of writing, such an admirable synthesis of the motives and actions of the drama following, such a clear forecasting of the scene on which it lifts the curtain, that it will be the disadvantage, almost the misfortune, of any one who allows his prejudice or habit against every manner of preface, to influence him in leaving it unread.

The ground reached through it has been traversed so much that scarcely any part is free from the footprints of those who have passed over it; yet, here it seems new country, and the tale already told so often gathers freshness from the unimpassioned conscience and the unbroken self-control of a narrator who was also a spectator of so large a part of his story. If one regrets, while one recurs to this introduction from the ensuing chapters, that the whole book could not have been written in the same strain, one must recognize that the same conscience and self-control demanded and resulted in a different method. Men's lives are lived in episodes; it is only when they have long been lived and are compressed in the foreshortening which history permits and perhaps requires, that their events can be treated as the color and texture of man's life. I do not know whether it was with the sense of this that the biographer changed his method when he came to his task in detail, but it is certain that he then ceases to generalize, that he forbids himself conjecture, and handles each fact in turn upon its own merits, relating it afterward to the other human events, and sparingly examining it at last as to its moral significance. It is a method which, as often as you note it, must persuade

¹ *The Life of Lyman Trumbull*. By Horace White. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913.

you of the peculiar fitness of such a man as Mr. White to write the life of such a man as Lyman Trumbull. His own long career as journalist, merging definitely in that of economist, began with the young newspaper man's experience in reporting the debates of Lincoln and Douglas. He learned to know the politics of the nation from thoroughly knowing the politics of Illinois; and he speaks of history from witness, if not experience, parallel with that of the man whose life he writes. No other sort of man could have done that sort of man such entire justice with such constant perception that the strictest justice in his case was the largest generosity. This is saying, I suppose, that the two men, the man who lived the life and the man who has written it, seem temperamentally of one make; and having said this I may safely leave the point to the reader's opinion; but I will allow myself further the pleasure of imagining the biographer's satisfaction in completing the story of his hero (as he would be loath to call him) on the conditions of simple verity which the hero himself would have chosen. I think that ought to be a very great satisfaction, and I think it must be a satisfaction almost as great to the author when he recurs to his characterization of this man or that to find that he has treated no man as a friend or a foe, but has used all alike with the same even justice as he has used his hero.

Hero and heroic are terms which I would not choose myself if I could readily put my pen on their analogues; but after all, they are, perhaps, not so much out of proportion; and the figure which is here posed against the background of that great time when the soul of the nation was gathering force to disown the national crime of slavery, does not lose grandeur as the background is lighted more and more by the common noon and commoner afternoon of mixed motives through which that soul redeemed itself. As wholly as Lincoln himself, Trumbull kept his actions free of these mixed motives; he was even less a politician, with less of political ambition than the man over whom, at the beginning of their joint national careers, he won the Illinois Senatorship. Lincoln had been the Anti-Slavery Whig Representative of his district in Congress, and Trumbull had been the Democratic lawyer who fought slavery in the Illinois Courts; but the repeal of the Missouri Compromise and the formation of the Anti-Nebraska party brought them together in the political

and personal amity which lasted through Lincoln's life and prolonged itself after his death in Trumbull's fidelity to his policy of reconstruction. It was by Lincoln's favor that Trumbull was first chosen Senator, but the favor was not bestowed till there was no longer any hope of his own success. These two great men were friends from that time on, but friends who respected without sentimentalizing or romancing each other. Very likely each had his reservations as to the other; there is no record, apparently, of Lincoln's reservation concerning Trumbull, but in the very important letter of Trumbull to his son, written long after the popular estimate of Lincoln was fixed, and here printed for the first time, he analyzes the nature of his friend with a frankness which is as unsparing as the spirit of the study is unenvious. He does justice to Lincoln's extraordinary qualities as a citizen, a lawyer, an orator, a statesman, but he seems not to realize the greatness of that mystical combination of tender humanity, poetic sensibility, and essential humility which could consist with towering ambition and plenary power. Yet in the end Trumbull portrays Lincoln in terms which recognize the nature of the man, and which, while they limit the exaggerations of the popular ideal, leave his grandeur almost unimpeached. "To sum up his character it may be said that as a man he was honest, pure, kind-hearted, and sympathetic; as a lawyer, clear-headed, astute, and successful; as a politician, ambitious, shrewd, and far-seeing; as a public speaker, incisive, clear, and convincing, often eloquent, clothing his thoughts in the most beautiful and attractive language, a logical reasoner, and yet most unmethodical in all his ways; as President during a great civil war he lacked executive ability, and that resolution and prompt action essential to bring it to a speedy and successful close; but he was a philanthropist and a patriot, ardently devoted to the Union and the equality and freedom of all men."

It would have been very desirable to have Mr. White's comment on this passage, but he makes none, and probably he feels that it is sufficiently the analysis of the man who wrote it as well as the man whom it analyzes. Taken in its circumstances and its relation to the political and personal friendship of the two men, it is very interesting, and the whole letter is a document of surpassing value, amid so many documents which will render this biography one of the most valuable contributions to our history. Psychologically

it is scarcely less interesting, for it is the expression of a man who, after all, was compelled to the utterance of the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, whenever he was summoned to bear witness of the actions and motives of others. It is as such a man that his biographer wishes him always to be seen, and he blinks no fact of his career which could judge him adversely; though mostly he lets the facts alone judge him. Probably Mr. White would rather Trumbull had not so fully identified himself late in his long public life with the free-silver heresy as to have written the platform of the People's Party; but he contents himself with recording that at Trumbull's house, where he met Mr. Bryan, whose talk ran eagerly on free silver, "Trumbull was inclined to the same belief," and then merely adds "we had an animated but friendly discussion on that question." As for the bold stand taken by Trumbull against "judicial usurpation," and the excesses of federal judges in "issuing blanket injunctions and punishing people for contempt of their assumed authority" his biographer notes merely that his position "was not, on the whole, more radical than the so-called Progressive platform of the present day."

It is not clear how much or little he approves of Trumbull's offer of his services in the case of Debs, or whether he finds Trumbull's position overstated in Mr. Clarence Darrow's saying that "the socialistic trend of the venerable statesman's opinions in his later years sprang from his deep sympathies with all unfortunates; that sympathy made him an anti-slavery Democrat in his early years, and afterward a Republican. He became convinced that the poor who toil for a living in this world were not getting a fair chance. His heart was with them." But it is Mr. White's habit throughout to let the reader make up his own mind and not to make it up for him. The biographer's opinions have long been known as at least conservative on points of political economy, and if he has preferred not to test the opinions of his hero (again the word which does not exactly fit) by them, that is an effect both of good taste and good sense, which his reader will hardly quarrel with.

As Trumbull moves through the story, his figure is peculiarly impressive from the changes which his mind and conduct seem to undergo. There are two kinds of men who are common enough in public life; the men who start liberal and end conservative, and the men who start conservative

and end liberal. Here, however, is a man who began his political life as a member of the reactionary party called Democratic, but had not gone far when he found himself averse to its cherished pro-slavery principles, and promptly took a leading part in the revolution against the slave-holders and their usurpation which followed the threatened repeal of the Missouri Compromise. His election to the United States Senate was one of the first triumphs of the Anti-Nebraska party, as it was called until it was called Republican. There at once he made a prominent stand against the reactionary party of his earliest affiliation. When Lincoln was elected and the war came, he was among the foremost in urging the administration to quick and vigorous dealing with the threatened and threatening rebellion. He thought the patient and temporizing Lincoln inadequate to the vital occasion, but he upheld him against the friends and against the foes who would have forced or fettered his wavering hand. When the war was over and the wisdom of Lincoln's plan for reconstruction appealed to men's desire for mercy as well as justice, he lent it the support of his whole strength, which was not withdrawn from the hapless man in whose hands the plan finally fell to pieces. He opposed whatever was craziest in the plans of reconstruction pressed upon the situation by Johnson's self-righteous as well as righteous enemies, and he fought the President's impeachment. When the errors and scandals of Grant's administration seemed to become a greater danger than they perhaps were, the ardent Republican of the party's better days helped organize the tragical disaster of the Greeley campaign, and ended his political career with it. After that he underwent some political defeats, but he had no more political successes, and it was in the practice of his profession at the bar that he developed the tendencies to what one must call the humaner side of our civic life, and wanted the poor, who earned the bread of all, to have their share of it. He feared the accumulation of money in a few hands, and apparently he hoped that something might be done by turning the gold there to silver. A man whose earlier and later life was spent in Courts of Law mistrusted the arrogance of judges, and nearly twenty years before the Progressive Party was, stopped short only of its ideal of the Recall. By this long way about, which includes in its circuit nearly the whole history of the nation and its most eminent events, he returned to "the dream of his

youth " to something of the indignant passion which burns in the letter telling his father of the murder of Lovejoy at Alton.

But I shall not be surprised if the reader who has followed my rehearsal of the apparently inconsistent events of Trumbull's public life shall deny that they are even apparently inconsistent. He may very well say that the variations are the effects of a temperamental fidelity to one continuous purpose; of the man's will, at all costs, to be true to himself in order that he may not be false to any man. Those great days through which he lived were very difficult days; the aviators have found " pits of air " in the atmosphere of our globe, and the empyrean is not always plain sailing; but few have laid a course and kept it with such constancy as the virtuous, the courageous, the veracious statesman whose story his biographer has seen as an important part of our national history.

His name, of course, was already a part of our history, for he was of that famous Connecticut family which in seven generations had been known for qualities which culminated in his American greatness. In our first stirrings of national consciousness the young Commonwealth became known to itself as " Brother Jonathan," as Washington liked to call that Jonathan Trumbull for whose seasoned judgments he waited in many moments of doubt with trust and affection; and our earliest achievements in art were the masterly paintings of that other Trumbull who made himself more definitely remembered. How much of his greatness Lyman Trumbull derived from his ancestry his biographer does not inquire, but we must imagine that it was no little. It wants many Lincolns to persuade mankind that a man may be efficiently and sufficiently his own ancestor, and we still look to the past for assurance of the future. It appears, however, that Lyman Trumbull, of Illinois, had no need of drawing upon the Trumbulls of Connecticut for the power to make his way nobly and beneficently in his generation, to be a great statesman, an eloquent orator, a patriotic citizen whose love of country did not finally fail to embrace the hardest-worked and the poorest-paid of his fellow-citizens. It is not for public men to wear their hearts upon their sleeves; they are not expected to do it; but it is somehow consoling to know that this public man, whom most men thought cold and many found aloof, was a man of warm and

tender affections. But why then has this man whom we have such reason, and so many reasons, to remember as one of the foremost of his time, held only a secondary place in the popular remembrance, while other men of cheaper make have held a primary place? Lincoln forever justifies his supremacy in our memory, but after him why Seward, why Sumner, why Chase, why not immediately Trumbull? It is evident that with all his fine and noble qualities he was not a leader of men. One of the most convincing of orators was not the most moving of advocates. One of the most sagacious of statesmen was not the most influential of politicians. A man whom his fellow-men had every cause to love and honor lacked the magic to dazzle them; his goodness and greatness were not obvious to those who could not come near him. His mind was judicial, not constructive; he was the fearless and upright judge of other men as well as of himself, and no party willingly bears unsparing scrutiny of its nature, or wishes to be made better or happier by the wisdom that convicts it of evil or folly; we always desire the Last Day put off as long as possible. If, as it might seem, Lyman Trumbull eventually found out that he was most the friend of those who most needed friends, of the industrial as well as the chattel slaves, but found it out so late that he had no longer the strength of his prime to give them, that would be pathetic. But no man creates his circumstances, or groups the events that form the opportunity of his highest powers. After all, there seems to be an over-ruling Providence, though its ways are dark.

W. D. HOWELLS.